Title of the Research Proposal: *Devi to Superwoman – A Feminist Reading of Select Indian Graphic Novels from 2000-2014.*

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INTRODUCTION -

This research proposes to make a thematic analysis of the graphic novels 'Devi'the Indian Goddess who reconfigures in the graphic novelsas the Indian Superwoman published between the years 2000 to 2014. Through the usage of formula, familiarity and shared sensibilities, artists mediate, integrate or reconcile the theme of Devi from her sacrosanct position to construct new identities in a perpetual interplay of linkages and combinations. Depiction of the Devis in various literatures who transforminto a superwoman prototype may provide an insightinto the survivaland transformation of Devi under the patriarchal culture inIndia.

The all-pervading popular culture of re-production of the 'Devi' myth,of one who is beautiful, powerful and benign on one hand and on the other, cruel punishing and fiercecreates a bipolar identity. However, the avenger and the nurturer are both a part of the hegemonic male discourse, the modern Indian male desires both, and is reviled for that dual desire. The first desire is to put the Devi on a pedestal and worship her as a shy virginal,domesticated goddess and thesecond asa Superwoman who is an object of intense sexuality, independent and strong.Within this narrative, the central figure is the myth of the "Devi" and her powerfulfunctionsas a mother, wife, sister, daughter and a superwoman. The research proposes to make a feminist reading into the phenomena of Devi re-presented as a Superwoman in the graphic novels of India from 2000-2014.

The genre of graphic novels refers to texts which uses illustrations, detailed visual imagery and words to describe a detailed complete plot, or significantly larger portions of a story. However unlike comic books that also uses visual imagery on text, the graphic novels tends to be longer works, plots are more complexed and detailed and they are not broken into parts like comic strips, broadsheets or single panel comics. Graphic novels actually predate comic books, the first graphic novel was published by Joseph Franz Von Goez which was an adaptation of Gottfreid August Burger*Lenardo und Blandine*'s in 1783. Some historians also feel that Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*in 1978 was the first graphic novel. Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman are credited to have brought about a popularity in the genre of graphic novels in the 1980's and 1990's. Graphic novels are more gritty, explicit and known to cater to mature audiences compared to the comic books.

THE PROPOSED AREA OF STUDY:

The journey of Devi in the graphic novels in India originate from P. Lal's series the Amar Chitra Katha, founded in 1967. Amar Chitra Katha was a project based on

the tension between canonized religious texts and the production of images, the global transmission of images and visual literacy, and the appropriation of high art for nationalist causes and finally as part of the struggle to put the text and the image together on a page in the service of an entertaining narrative. Karline McLain in the book 'India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes' finds that in the repertoire of Amar Chitra Katha *the thematic representation of the women and goddesses was such that the readers come to understand the problematic gendering embedded within the production of India's national identity, and thus it was a welcome addition to the growing literature on women, gender and nationalism.*

Amar Chitra Katha's nuanced move away from a scientific, grounded knowledge towards an acknowledgement of the superhuman, miraculous and magical feats of India's various figures perhaps paved the way for many such real and imagined women. Elements ranged from magic, mysticism, super heroine action, spirituality and afterlife. In the west too, a series of works based on the ideas of a Superwomen, who were similar to the concept of a Devi;became controversial sites for feminist/identity politics debates.The Superwoman identity wasfirst created by Marvel Comics.Superwoman is also the name given to several womencharacters created and published over the years by the DiamondComics.

The question that subsequently arises is, what defines a superwoman? Is it the ability to fight demons and restore order in the world, or an ability to balance all odds and bring about harmony? The answer would probably lie in her magical abilities. Magic in itself is indistinguishable from any other art, it is a technique or a strategy which is used to gain control. A superwoman is defined by her magic, and how she employs magic to gain control.

The *Devi* series of graphic novels written by Sourav Mohapatra, Siddharth Motiani, Samit Basu and created by the film maker Shekhar Kapur, chronicles the journey of an ordinary girl into a super woman, reintroducing her as the Devi. The character's mortal name is Tara Mehta, resurrected by the male gods to fight the fallen god Bala. She is identified as a woman who has a highly toned physique, is sexually confident,and not shy to kiss the gangster boyfriend Iyam and live with him outside marriage. Contrastingly, Devi on the inside is vulnerable, doubtful and unsure of her strengths, a combination of shy/sexy, dependent/independent dichotomies.

Priya in the graphic novel Priya Shakti is a depiction of the Devi /Superhero fighting the social stigma of rape in India. The narration travels fast from the time she was ostracised by her village and community, to when she found Devi. The Devi became her, vanquishes her '*lajja*', and by transformation, revenge and retribution she conquers all. The plot was inspired by the Nirbhaya rape case in Delhi, and Ram Devineni worked with the poet Vikas K Menon and artist Dan Goldman to combine the Devi's mythological stories with popular culture to connect with readers and promote social change.The book will be available in

Marathi and Hindi versions as well and is promoted by *Apne Aap Women Worldwide*.

The noticeable link in the graphic novels mentioned here is that of possession by the Devi, through trance, or a dream-like state. Transformation/Transition to Devi is not a conscious decision but an external imposition through divine means. The external interventions like possession is an example taken from real life incidents from the social fabric of India, wherein Indian women is allowed to become divine only through trance/ possession. They are not born divine but are 'made divine', that too not from their own choices. Referring to '*The Cult Of Draupadi: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurushetra*' by Alf Hiltebeitel the fire walking women are usually possessed and the magical feat of walking on fire is not due to endurance and practice, but through possession.

The absence of 'lajja' or shame, guilt, moral restrictions,brings to mind the never seen now/ demurely covered up Lajja Gauri or Lonjja Gauri. This figure which has been attributed to the pre-Aryan civilisation is a representation of the birthing position of women,with exposed thighs and vagina. The term 'Lajja' has been entrenched deeply with the social and familial roles of the Indian women from the colonial era. However, the graphic novels rejection of the concept gives rise to emerging roles and equations for the Indian women.

The theme of 'Devi' in the past and present manifests a tension within the dominant hierarchal order of the masculine social structure. On the popular level, the Devi stands out as distinct symbols of creation, motherhood, love, compassion, tolerance etc.; whereassome other layers remains persistently associated with symbols of lust, greed,blood sacrifices, trance possession and black magic/Tantra/witchcraft.

Do suchnarrativesnudge us towards an alternative means of looking at the reconfiguration of the Devi, superimposed on the phenomenon of Super Womanhood, thereby bringing forth new identities for the Indian women?

Hypothesis – The theme of Superwoman of India draws her inspiration, and existence from the traditional concept of 'Devi'. By studying the motif of Devi in the graphic novels as a point of departure and constructing a continuum, which arrives at Superwomanism may give us feminist insights into the re-production of Devi-The Super Woman.

PROPOSED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in her*Real and Imagined Women* writes that the understanding of the problems of 'real' women cannot lie outside the 'imagined' constructs and through which 'women' emerge as subjects. Negotiating with these mediations and simulacra, we seek to arrive at an understanding of the issues at stake.This study will focus on the ways the graphic novels have reconfigured the transition of Devi to create the new idea of an Indian Superwoman. The research

will chart using various aspects/issues of the Indian feminist movement that have been influences on the mentionedgraphic novels.The issuesof identity, autonomy, and re-presentations which demand a woman to become a Superwoman, are predominantly dependent on culture; but since culture is also heterogeneous, changing and open to interpretation, can become a site of contestation.

Reading a canonical, historical, or mythological text from a feminist perspective requires that one places the women at the center of the discourse. Are women present in this text? If so, how are they presented? If women are absent, why? And, what is the intention of the text when it comes to its description of women? What are the parallels and differences that have crept into the interpretation of the same discourse with the changing position of women in the society?How does an Indian women, "a doubly marginalised entity" portrayed as Devi and Superwoman, bear similarities to the actual situations in life?

To sum up, I propose to read the below mentioned graphic novels and focus on how they represent the sacred, how women and their identities are explored and depicted and finally in what way the present day issues related to women are explored/represented in graphic mediums.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1) How do then, and in what forms,the historiesof the 'Devi'survive in the prevalent graphic narratives dominated by the patriarchal system prevalent in Indian culture?

2) In what way does memory influence the themes of such narratives? (process of construction)

3) In what way does western discursive practices on Indian goddesses determine their interpretation and reception in the urban areas of India?

4) The role of globalisation and consumerism on creating such identities in India from 2000-2014.

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